



Reaching playoffs a priority in team's second season

By Joe Curley

Thursday, May 1, 2008

Having set the foundation, the Ventura County Fusion looks onward and upward as it opens its second campaign Friday night.

Last year's inaugural season ended one goal short of the United Soccer League's Premier Development League's postseason. The Fusion watched as its Southwest Division rivals, the Fresno Fuego, reached the national Final Four in Texas.

Six original Fusion players were snapped up by Major League Soccer in the offseason, including Thousand Oaks native Chance Myers, who the Kansas City Wizards drafted first overall in the MLS Superdraft.

Yet the players, coaches and front office staff seem united in a bullish outlook for the team's follow-up season.

"Last year, I didn't have too many expectations for the team, despite the roster we had," said goalkeeper Logan Frank. "I didn't know how the PDL system worked and none of us had played together.

"This year, I think we've set the bar higher as a team."

That means playoffs or bust.

"We have to make playoffs," said Frank. "Playoffs is a big thing for us, this year."

"Obviously, from a team perspective, we want to be in the playoffs this year," agreed general manager Ranbir Shergill.

That may seem difficult, considering who won't be back this summer.

The Fusion finished 9-4-3 last season, earning 30 points from 16 matches. It drew its final two games of the season at home, leaving it two points behind playoff qualifiers Fresno and San Fernando Valley.

Leading scorer and captain Mark Draycott, who tallied 10 goals in 13 matches, will not be back. Head coach Graham Smith hopes to fill that hole up front with a flurry of new signings.

Striker Jaime Ambriz is a Rio Mesa High and UC Santa Barbara product who played three years in Switzerland, scoring 24 goals for FC Lyss in 2002-03, before joining the Portland Timbers of USL Division 1 last year.

"Jaime has surprised me with his attitude," said Smith. "He's already had somewhat of a career in Europe.

"He's already displayed a freshness and constant movement. He's shown what forward play is all about."

Haitian center forward Jean Alexandre joined the team from Lynn University (Fla.), which gave the Fusion midfielder Nelson Pizarro last year.

"He's an immensely strong player who can hold the ball up and fend opposing defenders off," said Smith. "I'm hoping for great things from him."

The Fusion attack also includes returners like Hagop Chirishian, Michael Farfan and Gabriel Farfan, whose three

goals made him the team's second leading scorer last year. Plus, UC Santa Barbara midfielder Chris Pontius is a newcomer who can jump into the attack and Oxnard College's talented striker Sergio Garcia looks to have made the team after scoring the game-winning goal against the Columbus Crew in February.

"It's exciting," said Smith. "I'm hoping that the combinations of forward play that we have will mean that Mark Draycott will be well remembered, but he won't be missed.

"That's important because we had a heavy reliance on Mark to score goals last year."

There is less turnover at the back. Two first-choice defenders, UCLA central defender Brad Rusin and Cal State Northridge fullback Dylan Riley, return and goalkeeper looks like the club's steadiest position. First-choice Frank has recovered from his shoulder injury and Bryan Hill, who started the final seven matches of last season in Frank's absence, is also back.

Midfielder Alfonso Motagalvan, who joined the Fusion last year on the advice of his UC Santa Barbara roommate, Eric Avila, assumes Draycott's club captaincy.

"We have to realize that we've lost some key players," said Motagalvan. "But I like challenges."

Other key newcomers include English import Lee Stevens, a midfielder who played for AFC Totton in the 2007 FA Vase final at the new Wembley Stadium in London; Brazilian import Henrique, a central defender who played for Mashalltown (Iowa) C.C. in the National Junior College Athletic Association's Final Four; and well-known local products like Rodrigo Lopez, a 20-year-old midfielder from Santa Barbara who joins the Fusion from MLS club Chivas USA, and Brian Jones, a Cal Poly San Luis Obispo midfielder who twice won the Marmonte League at Westlake High.



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